

JFK's Rendezvous with Death

It is my contention that JFK himself was largely to blame for the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion and the creation of the Cuban Missile Crisis. JFK's handling of those episodes was incompetent and amateurish. However, following the missile crisis, something remarkable was happening for which JFK deserves a great deal of credit.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, negotiations were conducted in the form of secret letters between John F Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev. As a result of that communication, a significant level of understanding, respect, and trust had developed between the two leaders. And it didn't end when the crisis ended.

Six weeks later, NK sent this private letter to JFK: **We believe that you will be able to receive a mandate at the next election. You will be the US President for six years, which would appeal to us. At our times, six years in world politics is a long period of time. During that period we could create good conditions for peaceful coexistence on earth and this would be highly appreciated by the peoples of our countries as well as by all other peoples.**

The missile crisis had forced both men to take a fresh look at each other and the world. The crisis had forced them to begin to trust each other. The post-crisis dialogue was being facilitated by Pope John XXIII (who was dying of cancer) and Norman Cousins. They met at the Vatican in the spring of 1963, and Cousins recalled a decade later that the Pope kept repeating this phrase: *Nothing is impossible*. It summed up his message of hope for world peace. Both JFK and Khrushchev began to believe it.

Kennedy delivered these words on June 10, 1963, in his speech at the American University (in Washington, DC): **If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.**

Soon afterward, the two leaders signed the nuclear test-ban treaty. It was an alarming development to the military, CIA, and business leaders. They were committed to war, convinced that the only way to end the Cold War was to win it militarily. However, the people of both countries had begun to change as well. They wanted to see more steps toward peace, and they responded positively when JFK mentioned the test-ban treaty. Peace had become an issue Kennedy could use to his advantage in the upcoming presidential election. And he had a secret political ally in Krushchev. The hope for peace was contagious.

The nation's power brokers saw this development as a threat. JFK's reelection was now a foregone conclusion, and the Washington elite knew Kennedy had already decided to pull out of Viet Nam. Unfortunately, JFK's political enemies also believed that anything was possible, and everything was at stake. Although he was not aware of any specific assassination plots against him, JFK had a sense that his struggle for peace against the war plans of his administration would cost him his life. He seemed to embrace the idea, and he joked about it in ways that alarmed those close to him. For example, on the night after the missile crisis was successfully negotiated, John told Bobby: **This is the night I should go to the theater.** He had a rather cavalier approach to the subject, often refusing to take prudent precautions and security measures. It was a character trait that seemed to have been inherited by all Kennedy men.

John adopted Abraham Lincoln's prayer: **I know there is a God – and I see a storm coming. If he has a place for me, I believe that I am ready.** JFK cited it on March 1, 1962, at a presidential prayer breakfast. He recited it again on June 25, 1963 in a speech in Frankfurt, Germany. John's secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, discovered a piece of paper on which he had written the prayer while on a midnight flight.

JFK's favorite poem was *Rendezvous*, by Alan Seeger:

I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rusting shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air --
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.
It may be he shall take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath --
It may be I shall pass him still.
I have a rendezvous with Death
On some scarred slope of battered hill,
When Spring comes round again this year
And the first meadow-flowers appear.
God knows 'twere better to be deep
Pillowed in silk and scented down,
Where love throbs out in blissful sleep,
Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
Where hushed awakenings are dear . . .
But I've a rendezvous with Death
At midnight in some flaming town,
When Spring trips north again this year,
And I to my pledged word am true,
I shall not fail that rendezvous.

On October 5, 1963 (less than two months before his death) JFK was meeting with his National Security Council in the Rose Garden. His daughter, Caroline, appeared at his side and wanted to tell him something. He tried to redirect her attention, but she insisted. So, the President gave his full attention to his daughter, who recited *Rendezvous*. He had recited the poem to Jackie when they returned home from their honeymoon, and she had recited it to him several times over the years. Now Jackie had taught it to their five-year-old daughter, whose rendition of it left the National Security advisors in stunned silence.

When JFK died on November 22, 1963, so did the chance for peace. Instead, we got Viet Nam and several more years of the Cold War.